

# RALLYING COURAGE



Photos by Todd Linder / Skagit Valley Herald

**Elizabeth Hernandez, 9, of Mount Vernon** sits in a soap box car Saturday before her trial run at the Soap Box Derby Rally Races in Mount Vernon.

## SOAP BOX DERBY RACING CAN BE A LITTLE DAUNTING

By **MARTA MURVOSH**  
Staff Writer

**M**OUNT VERNON — MariaFernanda Silos-Olmeda was so nervous about competing at the Soap Box Derby Rally Races on Saturday that she couldn't sleep the night before.

The 8-year-old girl said she tossed and turned until at least 11 the night before, which is pretty late when you're in third grade.

MariaFernanda wasn't the only one with the jitters at the two-day event, which is part of the All-American Soap Box Derby race series. Her friend Elizabeth Hernandez, 9, said she got a little anxious during her trial run down the steep Second Street viaduct over Interstate 5. Although MariaFernanda said she once rode a soap box car in Mexico, it was the first time Elizabeth had ridden in a soap box car.



**Mount Vernon Police Department officer Jon Gerondale** grins at MariaFernanda Silos-Olmeda, 8, of Mount Vernon on Saturday as she sits in a soap box car before her second race at the Soap Box Derby Rally Races in Mount Vernon.

# Soap box: MV officers use derby as reward for Kulshan kids

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"I was kinda of like, scared," Elizabeth said. "My friends were cheering and I got nervous."

So Elizabeth braked and slowed down, but after that first run, she said she knew what to expect.

"It was so fun," Elizabeth said. MariaFernanda and Elizabeth were two of four children from Mount Vernon's Kulshan Creek neighborhood who were selected to participate in the rally, which had at least a couple dozen racers. Today, Abigail Rubio, 7, and Berenice Santa-Cruz, 8, will race.

The four girls were picked from dozens of neighborhood children because of their efforts during an after-school homework club and because they keep their grades up, said Mount Vernon Police officer Jon Gerondale, who is assigned to the neighborhood. The race was a reward for participating in programs designed

to keep kids in school and out of trouble. It's the second time the neighborhood station has participated in the soap box rally, which held its first event in Mount Vernon in May. This weekend, Gerondale was able to enter two cars for the Kulshan kids because another group didn't have a racer for its sponsored car.

More than 10 years ago, the high-density Kulshan neighborhood had the city's highest crime rate, and some residents were involved in gangs and drugs. Police credit the opening of the neighborhood station and its social and educational programs with helping to drop the crime rate, now below the city's average. The neighborhood is defined by East College Way, 30th Street, La Ventura Road and Kulshan Avenue.

Many Kulshan residents work long hours at low-paying jobs. For most Kulshan families, the cost of a \$600 soap box car kit is out of

reach, Gerondale said. Other parents at the rally said that they've found business sponsors to help their children.

The Kulshan car was sponsored by the Mount Vernon Wellness Center and neighborhood police station. The second car was sponsored by the Mount Vernon Police Services Guild, the labor group that represents Mount Vernon officers, and Citizens on Pro-active Patrol, a crime prevention group composed of volunteers. In the past, an officer's child has raced in that car.

Jon Skippington, who works in the Police Department's crime prevention program, said that other groups might spend more time preparing their cars for the rally than the neighborhood station does. For the race in May, the neighborhood children helped Skippington and Gerondale build the car.

"We took that one out of the chicken barn yesterday," said

Skippington with a grin.

MariaFernanda and Elizabeth each took a trial run so they could see how the cars performed and so race organizers could ensure that the girls understood how to operate the cars. The cars travel up to 30 mph. More experienced derby racers described the Second Street course, which ended at Montgomery Street, as "fast."

For her trial run, MariaFernanda looked down the race course. It was divided into two lanes with orange cones and bales of hay that protect racers from crashing into curbs.

Bremerton resident David Tipples, the parent of another racer and the rally director in Silverdale, offered tips to Elizabeth and MariaFernanda before their trials. He and another volunteer told them to lean over and tuck their heads toward the car.

"The first thing we tell them is if anything goes wrong with the

car or they get scared, they can put on the brake, and someone will come help them where they stop," Tipples said. "And 'Have fun; that's the other important thing.'"

The rally was a double elimination, meaning that each racer faced two different opponents in a total of four runs. Each racer faced the same person twice, and for the second race, they swap lanes and wheels.

When it came time for her first race, Elizabeth wore a serious expression as she tucked her helmeted head close to the cockpit. Her opponent Z.J. Crabtree was a champion racer who went to the national competition in July in Akron, Ohio, Skippington said. Z.J. won the first round by 0.634 seconds.

"0.634 is not bad," said Skippington, considering Elizabeth's competition.

In the next round Elizabeth got off to a good start, but Z.J. passed

her in the flat section near the end of the course for the win.

For MariaFernanda's first two races, she was matched against 9-year-old Ryan Wixson of Bremerton. Ryan, who was decked out in goggles, has competed in soap box derbies for two years. He lost his first round Saturday to MariaFernanda.

"It's nice that the kids have a ball," said Ryan's mother, Carolyn Wixson.

In their second round, the two cars zipped off downhill. For several seconds, it looked as if the two competitors were evenly matched, but then MariaFernanda lifted her head, creating wind resistance.

"She's got her head up," Gerondale said. "That's not good."

And Ryan shot ahead to win.

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